

Environment

DECCAN HERALD

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Pics by Anantha Subramanyam



Urban air pollution worse than Chernobyl

Air pollution in major cities may be more damaging to health than the radiation exposure suffered by survivors of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, according to a report published recently.

The study suggests high levels of urban air pollution cut short life expectancy more than the radiation exposure of emergency workers who were sent into the 19-mile exclusion zone around the site straight after the accident.

Two explosions at the Chernobyl reactor killed three people immediately and more than 30 died from acute radiation poisoning, but the radioactive plume released from the reactor spread over most of Europe and is estimated to have caused up to 16,000 deaths.

The latest study follows a report from the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution which said air pollution was re-

Study rates risks of city life as greater than radiation. Passive smoking is worse than life in blast zone!

of their greater exposure to pollutants in vehicle fumes.

Jim Smith, a scientist at the government's Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Dorchester, assessed the health risks faced by emergency workers at Chernobyl directly after the explosion and those who unofficially set up home in the exclusion zone afterwards. He compared them with the more familiar risks of air pollution, obesity, and passive and active smoking.

He concluded that the Chernobyl group received doses of radiation equiv-

"Populations still officially in the lands around may actually have health risk from than they were exposed to pollution in a such as nearby."

Dr Smith also long-term monitoring among survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and them with obsessive smoking. Immediate effects of the bombs led to a total of 210,000 deaths in cities. However, exposures experienced by survivors led to a loss of life expectancy significantly lower than caused by severe active smoking states.

Dr Smith said the report was based on risks from radiation, not with m-

Secrecy shrouds the Hebbal lake

Over the last decade, great concern has been expressed by Officials and Non-officials alike about the vanishing lakes in and around Bangalore. The birding community has played a crucial role in alerting the authorities about the serious consequences, climatically and otherwise of draining our wetlands and using the tank beds for housing estates and shopping centres. Tank beds, in the past, produced food during many months of the year.

Normal citizens (not expert town planners) have been watching with alarm this imbalance between the availability of our natural support base and the glib assurance that modern technology can overcome the shortages of the natural world.

May we remind our government, as well as our Captains of Industry, National and Multi-National, that all the cleverness of modern science cannot produce one drop of fresh water. All that we can do is to capture the rain that falls on the ground, store it ecologically in forest or vegetated land, or in lakes and ponds, or in aquifers underground.

As far as productivity of wetlands vs. terra firma is concerned, it has been proved worldwide that an aquatic environment is far more productive in the creation of biomass than dry land. In other words, in terms of kg for kg, you can produce more fish from water than wheat/rice by con-

Is the idea of private developers a sensible one? Do our planners know the value of our water bodies?

ing. Bangladesh, with its poor industrial infrastructure, survives on its wetlands.

After the Second World War, when nations in Europe were starving, at the WWF/UCN International conferences some of the most important discussions were related to water. Resolutions were passed recommending that Wetlands are not Wastelands but Liquid Assets of the greatest value. I recall attending one session of the IUCN meet in Lucerne in 1966 when there was much breast-beating about the callous manner in which both temperate and tropical countries treated their water resources. Saving the wetlands of Europe has become a major activity of conservationists in that continent.

This brings me to Hebbal - one of the prime water bodies of our city, a hundred and fifty acres in extent. How is it going to be used? There is much concern that it is going to become one more example of INDIA SHINING, the shine not for the multitude or for non-humans, forgetting what Peter Scott, chairman of WWF said, "It is their world too".

Conservation or entertainment?

Is the focus on Hebbal going to be on the conservation

rounding flora, terrestrial and aquatic with which the water body has integrated over many decades and consequent to which it has become such a prized location for water birds. Or is it the intention to create another centre of entertainment for the urban rich, already surfeited with every kind of excitement in our urban Bangalore?

I carry great memories of soul-stirring sights of 2000 plus waterfowl in the centre of Hebbal lake, flanked by a variety of plovers, storks, black-winged stilts and snipe on the water front. Such exciting birds as the red-headed merlin, the pied harrier and the Peregrine Falcon in the fields around. The view of the waterfowl on the shimmering water seen from the shade of the forest nursery at one end cannot be forgotten.

What do birds really need is only the assurance that they are safe from harm. For them, a boat powered by a diesel engine, or even by oarsmen, intruding into their domain is, in the famous words of President Bush, "unacceptable".

Why are our administrators so secretive? Why did the LDA sign an Agreement with the Oberois on the 19th day of May, 2006 without allowing the public to make suggestions to ensure that

wetland and its spectacular bird life would not be eroded. During the past few years, several birders including myself, have been in close touch with the Chief Executive Officer of the LDA with regard to the fate and plans for the "disappearing lakes of Bangalore", Doddagubbi, Agara, and many more. No mention was made about the plans afoot for Hebbal.

Agara plans

With regard to Agara, we hear, with some amusement and concern, that Zahira Begum, a lady from Hyderabad currently doing her PhD in Germany, will be given the contract on the basis of BOT, but only once she completes her doctorate and returns to India. Why tinker with Agara commercially, when S. Jayaram, the Deputy Conservator of Forests who was responsible for the planning while renovating the lake, has done such a sound conservation job?

In the Hebbal Agreement, Clause 19 reads, "The Second Party (Oberois) is at liberty to put up hoardings of appropriate size, approved by the first party...", nothing spoils the beauty of a natural scene, especially an unrestricted view of a water body as a hoarding does. Please Ms Oberoi, don't have any hoardings.

Clause 13 is the crucial one "The Second Party shall maintain and develop the lake without causing any damages (sic) to the lake, its surroundings and the environment during the period

If the Oberois really intend to honour this clause, may we suggest that before going ahead, they have a meeting at site with the concerned birders and environmentalists where there is a friendly exchange of views - not confrontation, but a real dialogue. It will raise the image of the Oberois in public estimation.

And to give the "Second Party" its due, let us remember that the A.T. Ramaswamy Panel on Land Encroachment says that 2,139 acres have been encroached upon from the Forest Department (*The Hindu* - 2211). That being the case, and since the Forest Department honestly admits its inability to prevent encroachment, the Oberois can be our saviours, let them protect the area and do what they want "without causing any damages (sic) to the lake, its surroundings and the environment".

Finally, let us be conscious of the simmering discontent prevailing in Bangalore as the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting children. There is palpable resentment against the vulgar display of wealth by millionaires, while slums continue to proliferate.

It may be a good move on the part of the Oberois to build a water source in one corner of the lake so that the people of the locality can continue to access the water for their domestic needs.

ZAFAR FUTEHALLY

The author is a reputed birder

sponsor for 24,000 premature deaths in Britain every year.

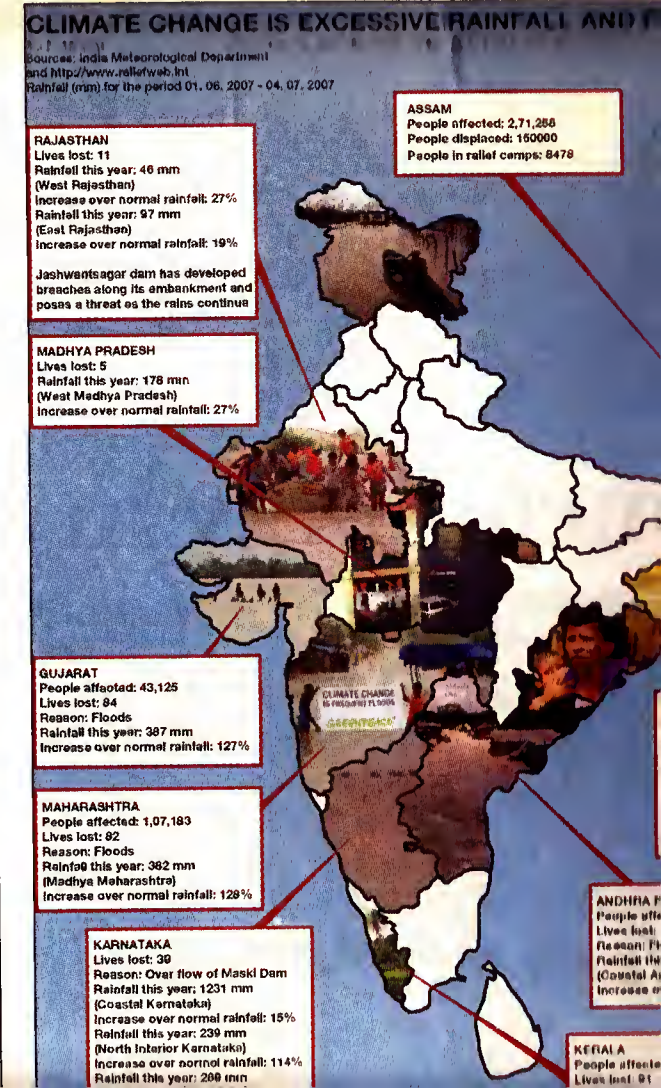
Sir John Lawton, chairman of the commission, said the government had consistently failed to tackle rising levels of chemicals in the atmosphere in cities.

Other findings this year showed that women living in areas of high air pollution were at greater risk of heart disease and death, while children living within 500m of motorways suffered more permanent lung damage and lower life expectancy, probably because

chest x-rays and likely to cause one extra death in a hundred by increasing the risk of cancer.

The health risks associated with air pollution and passive smoking appear more severe. Pollution in central London increases mortality due to heart and lung disease by 2.8 percent compared with Inverness, Britain's least polluted city, while living with a smoker increases mortality by 1.7 percent, the study found.

In the journal BMC Public Health, Dr Smith writes:





Above and top: Pics of the Hebbal lake which is almost dry. Once, not so long ago, this lake used to play host to hundreds of birds.

With the first spell of Monsoon having reached every part of India, Greenpeace takes stock of the damage in terms of loss of lives and habitation it has caused. With rising temperatures due to climate change, the intensity of Monsoon rains will further increase. The impacts of such calamities on human and the economy are enormous.

Global warming and India

The above map compiled by Greenpeace based on inputs of rainfall across the country this year shows that it exceeds the normal in most places. However, going by scientific reports the monsoons are near normal this year and hardly show a variation upwards by 5 percent.

Actually both the facts are true. The monsoons have been arriving as faithfully as they always have and delivering the goods. It is the distribution that has been disrupted and largely due to global warming. With India standing fifth in the world in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, the heating over land and sea cannot be ignored. As has been predicted by the IPCC report, the hydrological cycle will become more intense, both with higher annual average rainfall as well as longer periods of drought. It adds that in Asia, decreased availability of fresh water might effect more than a billion people by the 2050s.

Water resources are already under strain here. India has 16 per cent of global population but only 4 per cent of global water

resources.

There is no man hand in the about some of maximum impact. It is high time we and policy makers and take the apment need not shown by the S the impact of cl to a loss in aver head of 5-20 pe more than than ting emissions, 550ppm CO₂e percent of GDP At this point, It decarbonise ene done by making partner in energ ing energy effici decentralising e possible, etc. W more for someo

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